Zimbabwean Early Childhood Education Special Needs Education Teacher Preparation for Inclusion

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Abstract

The current study examined special needs education teachers' preparation for inclusion in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The present descriptive study drew on a sample of twenty-eight ECE special needs education teachers purposively drawn from Mashonaland West educational province of Zimbabwe. A constant comparative analysis of data organisation with continual adjustment was utilised throughout data analysis to identify recurring themes and discover common patterns while maintaining individual contextual information. Despite participants' Afrocentric and Eurocentric conceptualisation and support for inclusion, they were selective regarding children to serve based on the nature and severity of the children's disabilities. Limited capacity in teacher education for inclusion in teacher education institutions hampered participants' preparation. Infusion of training on inclusion across ECE teacher education curricula, affording teacher candidates teaching practice in inclusive settings, collaboration of teacher education institutions with other stakeholders and in-service training of teacher educators could enhance teacher preparation for inclusion. The present study is a baseline for future studies on special needs education teacher preparation for inclusion in ECE.

Keywords: *Children with disabilities, early childhood education, inclusion, mainstream teachers, teacher preparation, Zimbabwe*

Introduction

In compliance with civil rights movements as expressed in several international human rights declarations, conventions, statements, agreements and charters including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) to which Zimbabwe is a signatory, the country adopted inclusion in Early Childhood Education

(ECE) in 1994 (Chakuchichi 2013; Majoko, 2017; Mandina 2012; Mpofu, Kasayira, Mhaka, Chireshe and Maunganidze 2007). Since then, dramatic changes in the demographic profile have challenged ECE teachers in the country to confront the significantly increasing diverse needs of young children and their families including those with disabilities and vulnerable to underachievement, marginalisation and exclusion in education (Deluca, Tramonta and Kett 2013; Majoko, 2005; Mandina 2012; Musengi and Chireshe 2012; Mushoriwa and Muzembe 2011). A universally accepted definition of inclusion is illusive, thus far, as a result of the conceptual complications in defining it including what counts as evidence of its practice and model practice (Ainscow 2005; Black-Hawkins and Florian 2012; Dyson and Gallannaugh 2007). Nevertheless, the philosophy can be viewed as a process which involves transformation of mainstream pedagogical settings in order to ensure that all children including those with disabilities are supported to meet their academic and social potential (Chhabra, Srivastava and Srivastava 2010; Oliver and Reschly 2010). Inclusion involves removal of barriers in environment, communication, teaching, curriculum, socialisation and assessment at all levels (Batu 2010; Hornby 2010; Majoko, 2016c; Naicker 2007).

Inclusion, thus, includes a far wider range of children vulnerable to exclusion and marginalisation than those with special educational needs (Agbenyega 2007; Allan 2006; Ballard 2012; Deppeler 2006; Pantic and Florian 2015). It is entrenched in access, participation, acceptance and achievement of all children including those with disabilities and their families in the mainstream activities of the school community while meeting their full range of unique needs as well as contributing to the development of school community (Chakuchichi 2013; Donnelly and Watkins 2011; Flecha and Soler 2013; Florian and Rouse 2011; Slee 2011). Within an inclusive perspective on teaching and learning, children with disabilities are not only physically integrated, but also socially, culturally and emotionally integrated (Chireshe 2013; Ncube 2006; Pantic 2015; Slee 2010; Voss and Bufkin 2011). Inclusion thereby becomes a component of a broad human rights and social justice agenda that situates itself on the centre stage of the education of all children with unique needs in their neighbourhood mainstream school education systems (Agbenyega 2007; Dyson and Gallannaugh 2007; Florian and Spratt 2013; Rafferty and Griffin 2005; Rouse 2008).

In Zimbabwe, children with disabilities are learners with speech or language impairments, visual impairments including blindness, hearing impairments including deafness, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injuries and other health impairments or specific learning disabilities. Consequently, they have needs that require special needs education and related services and programmes (Majoko, 2013; Mpofu et al. 2007; Mutepfa, Mpofu and Chataika 2007). In spite of the indispensability of current and reliable statistical data on the number and percentage of these children in planning policy and provision, a widely contrasting prevalence of disability is revealed in different studies that have been undertaken in the country. These include the Inter-Censal Demographic Survey Report of 1997, the last comprehensive study on the prevalence of disability among children, which estimated that there were 57 232 children with disabilities. In contrast, the United Nations Children Emergence Fund Report of 1997 approximated that there were 150 000 children with disabilities which was three times as many as the former survey report (Mandipa and Manyatera 2014). On the other hand, Chakuchichi (2013) reports that, at the time of his study, there were approximately 600 000 children of school-going age with disabilities in the country. This warrants a

comprehensive disability survey as a constituent of a national census process because a significant proportion of babies are currently born with HIV/AIDS, the majority of whom will also be orphaned (Deluca et al. 2013; Education For All 2013; Majoko, 2016c; Mandipa and Manyatera 2014). Despite the absence of recent and reliable statistical data on the prevalence of disability among children, research reveals that the most prevalent forms of disabilities among school-going age children in the country include hearing impairments, physical impairments, speech functional difficulties, mental impairments and intellectual and sensory impairments (Chireshe 2011; Majoko, 2016a; Mandipa and Manyatera 2014; Mpofu and Shumba 2012).

Consistent with the global pursuance of inclusion in ECE, the government, in consultation and partnership with other stakeholders, has institutionalised supportive management infrastructure. This includes the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) of Zimbabwe which is responsible for infant education which incorporates ECE A for 3 to 4 year-olds and B for 4 to 5 year-olds (Kuyayama-Tumbare 2013). Within the MoPSE of Zimbabwe, the Department of Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education delivers various services and programmes to facilitate accessible, equitable and quality neighbourhood education for all children including those with disabilities and vulnerable to underachievement, marginalisation and exclusion in education (Mugweni and Dakwa 2013). These include needs driven quantitative expansion and quality assurance of educational provision while advocating for awareness, responsiveness and inclusion of these children among stakeholders including parents, teachers, school heads, communities and the country at large. This involves staff development of Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education personnel, school heads, teachers and national, provincial and district education officers. The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development (MoHTES and TD) of Zimbabwe in consultation and partnership with the MoPSE provides pre-service and in-service training to teachers in inclusive ECE (Chireshe 2013; Education For All 2015; Majoko, 2005; Mpofu and Shumba 2012). It also facilitates early identification, intervention, rehabilitation and inclusive interaction services and programmes (Chakuchichi 2013; Chireshe 2013; Deluca et al. 2013; Majoko, 2013; Mugweni and Dakwa 2013)

The Department of Teacher Education of the University of Zimbabwe in collaboration with the Department of Infant School Education, the Department of School Psychological Services and Special Needs Education, the MoHTES and TD and the MoPSE provides strategic support towards teacher preparation and development for inclusion in ECE (Majoko, 2016d; Mugweni and Dakwa 2013). Eleven of the twelve primary teachers' colleges and six universities in Zimbabwe provide full-time and part-time teacher professional preparation and development in inclusion in ECE at diploma and degree levels (Education For All 2015). Similarly, the Mother, Baby, Toddler programme in Harare provides a child caregiver programme that provides a forum for early intervention for children with special needs, discussions, parenting lessons and sharing ideas among parents and other childcare givers on best practices in parenting (Kuyayama-Tumbare 203).

In alignment with civil rights movements, as expressed in several international human rights legal infrastructure, the country passed and enforces several pro-inclusion legislations and policies. These include the Zimbabwe Education Act of 1987 as revised in 2006, the Disabled Persons Act of Zimbabwe of 1996 and the Zimbabwe Constitution Amendment Number 20 of 2013 section 75 (Majoko, 2016a; Kuyayama-

Tumbare 2013; Mugweni and Dakwa 2013). It has also produced circulars mandating the inclusion of children with disabilities in their neighbourhood mainstream ECE settings including the Secretary's Circular Number 2 of 2000, the Secretary's Circular Number 14 of 2004, the Director's Circular Number 7 of 2005, Director's Circular 12 of 2005 and the Principal Director's Circular Number 20 of 2011 (Chireshe 2011; Mandina 2012; Mpofu and Shumba 2013; Musengi and Chireshe 2012). According to the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture of Zimbabwe's Annual Statistics Report of 2012, a total of 5 625 (98%) of primary schools in the country provide ECE classes (Education for All 2015).

Impelling the impetus for inclusion in ECE in Zimbabwe and the global world are its benefits to children with disabilities which include enhanced well-being, social skills and cognitive and language skills (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2011; Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011; Forbes 2007) and benefits to children without developmental delays which include development of tolerance, compassion, empathy and awareness of their own abilities as well as learning to assist others (Florian 2009; Rafferty and Griffin 2005). Research, nevertheless, reveals that inclusion is one of the most challenging fundamental innovations confronting stakeholders including policy makers, teachers, principals and parents (Ballard 2012; Black-Hawkins and Florian 2012; Blanton, Pugach and Florian 2011; Hornby 2010). The lack of professional preparation and development of teachers in inclusion is a fundamental barrier to its successful and effective practice as they provide the necessary and appropriate services and programmes and can influence other stakeholders including the children in their classrooms, colleagues and parents (Berry 2010; Florian and Linklater 2010; Florian and Rouse 2009; Florian and Spratt 2013; Forbes 2007).

Research done in Cambodia (Kim and Rouse 2011), Malawi (Itimu and Kopetz 2008); Mozambique (Ncube 2006), Serbia (Pantic and Wubbels 2010) Tanzania (Kisanji and Saanane 2009), the United States of America (Blanton et al. 2011) and Zambia (Miles 2009) shows that teachers lack adequate professional preparation and development to successfully and effectively teach all learners including those with disabilities and vulnerable to underachievement, marginalisation and exclusion in education. In order to successfully and effectively practice inclusion, teachers need several competencies including skills, knowledge, understanding, values, moral sensibilities and professional identity (Ballard 2012; Edwards 2010; EADSNE 2011; Florian 2009). The subsequent section presents inclusive pre-school teacher competence in inclusion.

Pre-school teacher competence in inclusion

Since the global adoption of inclusion, the roles and responsibilities of teachers have changed as they are expected to understand the characteristics of children with disabilities and adapt the curriculum in tandem with their developmental level and interact in the classroom with all children, including those with disabilities (Bruns and Mogharreban 2009). Teachers are also charged with the development and improvement of all children in their classrooms through creation and establishment of an appropriate learning environment involving all the children in learning activities and using evidence-based strategies (Hundert 2007; Miles 2009; Rafferty and Griffin 2005). Furthermore, teachers are required to have skills, competencies, attitudes and understanding of methods for development, management and the implementation of individualised educational programmes. They are expected to collaborate with other

stakeholders, including families, in order to give them the support they need (Forlin 2010; Naicker 2007; Ncube 2006; Pantic and Wubbels 2010). Similarly, teachers should be knowledgeable and informed about using behavioural interventions and effective classroom management that can enhance teaching and learning of all children including those with disabilities (Arbetter and Hartley 2002; Forlin 2010; Miles 2009).

In order to realise successful and effective inclusion, teachers need to be knowledgeable about the characteristics of all the children in their classes (Oliver and Reschly 2010; Winn and Blanton 2005). They must motivate positive social behaviour and allow all children to be exposed to creative experiences in pedagogical settings while also having the ability to adapt pedagogical content, process, environment and product/assessment to the unique needs of individual children. In addition, teachers should institutionalise strategies that facilitate quality teaching and learning for all in the mainstream classroom (Edwards 2007; Malak 2013; Oswald and Swart 2011; Slee 2011). Research, nevertheless, frequently reveals that teachers are professionally ill-prepared to teach children with disabilities (Bruns and Mogharberran 2009; Florian 2012; Hundert 2007; Malak 2013; Majoko, 2005) as they have insufficient knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies to serve in inclusive pedagogical settings (Batu 2010; Crane-Mitchel and Hedge 2007; Gok and Erbas 2011; Itimu and Kopetz 2008). This is due to a lack of adequate pre-service training (Jennings 2007; Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011; Malak 2013). Teachers, consequently, require workshops, seminars and additional courses as well as the on-the-job/in-classroom experience in this subject (Crane-Mitchell and Hedge 2007).

Teachers' inadequate skills and experiences with children with disabilities result in their reluctance to accommodate these children in their classrooms (Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, Hinkson-Lee, Hudson, Russel and Kleinke 2012; Deppeler 2006; Edwards 2007). Frequently, teachers report that they need more information in areas such as the development of individualised educational plans, assessment of children's progress, adaptation and modification of the curriculum, motivation of all children to participate in academic activities and management of behavioural challenges in the pedagogical setting (Flecha and Soler 2013; Itimu and Kopetz 2008; Jennings 2007). Also, teachers often report that they need to learn special methods and strategies to facilitate learning of children with disabilities (Bruns and Mogharberran 2009; Oswald and Swart 2011; Voss and Bufkin 2011). Therefore, a lack of confidence in their ability to differentiate instruction and make necessary individual adaptations for children may be a negative experience for teachers (Crane-Mitchell and Hedge 2007; Gok and Erbas 2011; Hundert 2007).

Most teachers further experience complications in collaborating with other stakeholders, including families as they seek to motivate them to be involved in the education of their children and be a component of inclusive practices (Arndt and Liles 2010; Bessette 2008; Hornby 2010). Even though teachers report that they lack sufficient knowledge about inclusion and the competency to educate children with disabilities (Gok and Erbas 2011; Rouse 2008; Slee 2011), overall, many hold strong and positive attitudes towards inclusion and feel that children with disabilities should be educated in mainstream classrooms and that these children benefit from inclusion (Crane-Mitchell and Hedge 2007; Varlier and Vuran 2006). Some teachers, though, are hesitant about the inclusive school movement and believe that children with disabilities need to be educated at home or in special settings because they interfere with the learning environment and might hurt their typically developing peers

(Majoko 2017). Teachers report that the primary problems related to inclusion include the behaviour of children with disabilities, their social rejection by their typically developing peers, the challenges related to finding additional time for planning their work and a lack of motivation of the families regarding their children's education (Jung 2007; Kisanji and Saanane 2009; Majoko 2016c; Musengi and Chireshe 2012). Also, teachers state that they require training, support from special education teachers and additional materials and tools for inclusive pedagogical settings (Mutepfa et al. 2007; Oliver and Reschly 2010; Pantic and Wubbels 2010) and that their most fundamental need is learning to adapt the curriculum to meet the requirements of inclusion and engagement of children with disabilities (Hattie 2009; Slee 2011; Varlier and Vuran 2006).

Similarly, Bruns and Mogharberran's (2009) study found that pre-school teachers needed effective strategies and intervention techniques to enhance interaction between children in inclusive classrooms, to design and evaluate individualised educational plans, to collaborate with families in order to develop behavioural strategies for teaching positive behaviour and to institutionalise effective classroom management. These researchers recommend adequate professional teacher preparation in positive behavioural support and functional assessment that facilitates inclusive pedagogy.

Crane-Mitchell and Hedge's (2007) study established that pre-school teachers lacked understanding of the characteristics of young children with disabilities and knowledge related to meeting the needs of these children. These researchers also found that pre-school teachers needed more training which focused on their knowledge, skills and experiences on inclusive practices. Most of them stressed the need for hands-on training opportunities for working with young children with disabilities. Sadler's (2005) research established that many pre-service teachers did not know how to apply knowledge about children with speech and language disorders in inclusive settings as they had acquired such knowledge through instead of "hands on" experience. The researcher also revealed that simple provision of information to teachers is insufficient to professionally prepare them adequately to work with children with diverse disabilities. Hundert's (2007) study focused on the type of teacher training program required for inclusive practices. He stressed that the method used to teach new skills and knowledge needs to contain intervention strategies that can be included into daily instruction and routines.

Varlier and Vuran's (2006) study found that teachers needed seminars, courses, in-service training and training during their undergraduate studies in order to acquire knowledge and experience to serve children with disabilities. Similarly, because most teachers believe that they lack skills to meet the needs of children with special needs (Alborz, Slee and Miles 2013; Odom, Buysse and Soukakou 2011; Winn and Blanton 2005), they are keen to acquire the knowledge that they lack in order to support the development of these children (Florian and Linklater 2010; Forbes 2007; Idol 2006). Teachers also reported that the courses they were exposed to during pre-service training were inadequate to equip them with skills and competencies to work with children with different ability levels and solve the challenges confronted in inclusive classrooms (Alborz et al. 2013; Chhabra et al. 2007; Forbes 2007). Teachers further revealed that they did not get adequate support from principals and other professionals who served children with diverse needs. Other studies report that, if the teachers are afforded training which focuses on children with disabilities and inclusive practices, their attitudes will change (Alborz et al. 2013; Ballard 2012; Friend and Bursuck 2012).

Rationale

Research reveals that, globally, teachers have serious reservations about inclusion as they need to acquire new skills, understandings, competencies, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs in order to meet the full range of learning needs among all children including those with disabilities in their classrooms. Consequently, the current study is indispensable because of its focus on the transformation of teachers to optimise their capacity to accommodate all children regardless of their needs and to guarantee that they all belong to a school community. Teachers also report a necessity for more information, knowledge and expertise to support their attempts to include children with disabilities in their classrooms (Edwards 2007; Malak 2013; Pantic 2015). Studies reveal that when teachers acquire the professional knowledge needed in inclusion, they may support it (Arbetter and Hartley 2002; Florian and Rouse 2009; Kim and Rouse 2011). The findings of the current study can influence policy makers, researchers and professionals, among other stakeholders in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, to focus on developing and implementing pre-service and in-service programmes that will be beneficial to inclusive pre-school settings so that they can optimise development of all children.

Despite the institutionalisation of several initiatives in support of inclusion in Zimbabwe and the significant increase in the number of children with disabilities served in mainstream ECE settings coupled with the national and global pursuance of the philosophy, there is lack of research on ECE teachers' development in it. In Zimbabwe, the current study is seemingly the first of its kind entrenched in a qualitative research methodology for an in-depth understanding of special needs education teachers' preparation for inclusion in ECE. In spite of the pursuance of inclusion in the developed, developing and under-developed worlds, there are differences in practicing the philosophy, not exclusively between nations, but also within nations, continents, states, provinces, districts and schools. This is particularly the case in the Zimbabwean context because there are vast variations between mine, resettlement, rural, farm, town and urban localities and educational regions with significantly higher per capita incomes than those where the majority of the population survive below the poverty-datum line.

Research on teacher education is indispensable in the institutionalisation of needs-entrenched teacher development in inclusion (Berry 2010; Blanton et al. 2011; Naicker, 2007). The Zimbabwean and global pursuance of inclusion makes it imperative to interrogate ECE teachers' preparation for it. Because teacher education for inclusion is a relatively recent phenomenon in Zimbabwe and the global world, an examination of teachers' preparation in it is fundamental in informing individual and institutional capacity-building initiatives. The present study is timeous in the era of ground-breaking national and global paradigm shifts from exclusivity to inclusivity in ECE. This is because it can enable stakeholders, including policy makers, teachers and school administrators in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, to glean knowledge and information accumulated from other countries while they are institutionalising inclusion in ECE. Specifically, the current study addressed the following research question:

How do special needs education teachers in Mashonaland West educational province of Zimbabwe perceive their preparation for inclusion in Early Childhood Education?

Methodology

The current study adopted qualitative methodology in order to investigate special needs teachers' preparation for inclusion in ECE in Mashonaland West educational province of Zimbabwe. This is because it is often used to inform policy and practice as it captures the perspectives of people involved in complex contexts (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007; Creswell 2009). Qualitative methodology provides a systematic avenue to comprehend complex phenomena and events within a specific context. This makes it an ideal way to generate scientifically based thematic evidence and insight to inform practice in education and provides the basis for future research (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). It also yields detailed data from a small group of participants (Grbich 2007; Silverman 2009). Several factors, including the centrality of the researcher, the descriptive nature of the data, a concern with process rather than outcome, inductive analysis of data and the essential concern with meaning influenced the utilisation of qualitative methodology in the current study (Cohen et al. 2007; Creswell 2009). In order to carry out the current study, ethical approval was sought and obtained from the MoPSE of Zimbabwe, Mashonaland West provincial education offices and principals of participating ECE settings. Thereafter, participating ECE special needs education teachers were contacted for approval prior to the execution of the study. The above mentioned parties were provided with a brief, clear, concise and precise research profile to secure the needed approval, permission and informed consent for carrying out the current study.

Sampling

The study used purposive sampling to select participants. ECE special needs education teachers were recruited through contacts with Mashonaland West provincial education offices. Individual ECE special needs education teachers were screened telephonically for establishment of eligibility for participation and to schedule the day, time and venue of the interview. Participants' inclusion criteria were: (1) at least a primary school teacher's diploma with endorsement in ECE and a Bachelor of Education degree in special needs education; (2) at least four years of experience in teaching a child/children with disabilities in an inclusive ECE class; and (3) currently teaching in an inclusive class in an ECE setting in Mashonaland West educational province.

The sample comprised 28 ECE special needs education teachers (19 females and 9 males). All participants had pre-service training on inclusive education in their primary school teachers' diploma as a component of their core course, Theory of Early Childhood Development, which included fundamentals of inclusion including disability categories, curriculum management, assessment and evaluation and legal issues. Also, all participants had in-service training in Bachelor of Education in Special Needs Education which exposed them to several inclusive education issues. These included contemporary issues in special needs education, mental retardation, physical, motor and health related disabilities, stakeholders of special needs education, rehabilitation and transition of children and youth with disabilities, curriculum management in special needs education, visual and hearing impairment and disability and special needs education. Even though they had attended different teacher education institutions, all participants had been exposed to the same pre-service and in-service teacher education curriculum accredited by the main university of the country. In addition to the foregoing qualifications, three participants had

Bachelor of Primary Education and three participants had Bachelor of Sociology, Bachelor of Education Management and Bachelor of Arts respectively. Participants' teaching experiences ranged from 7 to 16 years and they were aged from 34 to 61 years. When theoretical saturation was reached, which occurred when no new or relevant data emerged concerning a category, and categories were well developed with regard to their properties, dimensions and variations, the adequacy of the sample was determined (Silverman 2009).

Procedure

Before the onset of the interviews, informed consent was sought and obtained from the participants and they were informed about procedures put in place to guarantee that their information was confidential. A signed consent form was obtained from each participant which consisted of specific information about procedures put in place including the use of pseudonyms in reporting findings in order to maintain confidentiality of participants. Since the interview allows for participants' opinions and perceptions about a phenomenon under research in their own words, it is a vital instrument in gathering data for the qualitative researcher (Cohen et al. 2007; Creswell, 2009). Semi-structured individual interviews were executed with 23 participants (14 females and 9 males) in English using an interview guide. They were audio-taped, with participants' consent, to enhance accuracy in data collection and assist the researcher to be more attentive to the participants during the interviews. The researcher scheduled and conducted interviews, which were carried out between March 2014 and October 2015, at a time and place of participants' choice including classrooms, homes and offices. The length of the individual interviews differed and ranged from 45 minutes to 80 minutes. Participants were asked about a range of issue pertaining to their preparation for inclusion in ECE including: (a) understanding of inclusion; (b) perception of inclusion; and (c) teacher education for inclusion. Although there was a degree of structure and organisation to the process as a result of the use of the interview guide, the approach was still flexible as probing questions were asked on certain issues.

Participants contacted the researcher for a copy of the interview script and the informed consent form. Participants filled in a demographic questionnaire upon completion of the interview. Following the individual interviews, a focus group was executed with a convenience sample comprising of seven participants (two males and five females) drawn from one educational district. Five female participants in the focus group were new to the study while two participants had participated in individual interviews. The focus group interview was audio-taped, with participants' consent, to enhance accurate capturing of data. The focus group was executed in one educational district. Since interview participants had been selected from multiple educational districts across Mashonaland West educational province, some up to 350 km from the location of the focus group, it was not feasible for all individual interview participants to attend the focus group. Focus group interviews afforded an opportunity to test the credibility of the findings with participants who were familiar and unfamiliar with the study. Opening up analysis to two critical readers for peer review assisted to safeguard bias and use multiple perspectives in data interpretation. Critical readers also reflected on whether the knowledge and information yielded from the study was authentic as regards identifying participants' perceptions regarding their preparation for inclusion in ECE.

Data analysis

Every tape-recorded interview was transcribed verbatim and, in order to identify recurring themes and discover common patterns while maintaining individual contextual information, the constant-comparative method was used to analyse the data. The researcher attended weekly research office meetings with two critical readers who were experts in qualitative research for data analysis. The researcher and the two critical readers read a few interviews at a time independently highlighting important quotes and listing themes that appeared to be present across interviews. At weekly research office meetings, the researcher and the critical readers would share the themes they had discovered and discussions were held until they reached a consensus on the quotes that best represented the themes that were tabled. This process was repeated until all the interviews had been read and the members of the research office reached a consensus on the list of important themes and quotes.

In order to ensure that any themes or quotes missed on the first reading were established, interviews that were read early in the process were reread. After a list of themes was generated which the researcher and the critical readers agreed were present, lists of quotes supporting each theme were gleaned from the interviews. Quotes that explained the themes and represented the views of multiple participants were finally selected. After reaching a consensus on the themes and supporting quotes and to enhance the reliability of the results, the researcher conducted a second level member check through the provision of a list of the themes and quotes to twelve randomly selected participants (Grbich 2007; Silverman 2009). After reading the themes and quotes, these participants confirmed with the researcher that the interpretation of the data appeared to be accurate. A thematic presentation of the findings is presented in the following section.

Findings

Through the analysis of the interview transcripts, five themes emerged which were: conception of inclusion, perception about inclusion, competence in inclusion, concerns about teacher education for inclusion and strategies to enhance teacher education for inclusion.

Conception of inclusion

Most participants (17) understood inclusion as both an Afrocentric and Eurocentric philosophy that is embedded in the achievement of all children including those with disabilities in neighbourhood mainstream school classrooms, as confirmed in the following selected excerpts (pseudonyms used in order to ensure privacy and confidentiality of the participants):

> "Inclusion is meeting the full range of needs of individual learners with and without disabilities in mainstream school settings. It is founded on Afrocentric and Eurocentric moral obligation, cultural and religious norms, national and international conventions which cherishes human differences and survival of people in their own homes, families, communities, countries and the continent" (Interview Participant [IP]: 21).

> "Inclusion is context-specific adaptations and modifications in teaching and learning strategies, subject matter, processes, evaluation, assessment and educational settings to facilitate access, participation and achievement

of all children including those with developmental delays and vulnerable to underachievement, marginalisation or exclusion in regular classrooms which are nearest to their homes" (IP: 2).

"Advancing Ubuntu and Western life tenets including communalism and interdependence and respect for human rights, inclusion is quality education for all children in their local rural, town, urban, ghost town or resettlement mainstream schools through identification and removal of barriers to learning" (Focus Group Participant [FGP]:3).

"[Inclusion] is a continuous process of problem-solving by individuals, organisations and institutions that are key role players to respond to the unique needs of all educands without their exclusion in their neighborhood mainstream classrooms. African moral and legal premise including respect of the right of everyone to a mainstream life regardless of their disabilities, abilities, race, gender, socio-economic status, language and any other differences underpins inclusion" (IP: 5).

Inversely, six participants viewed inclusion as a philosophy that is embedded in the advancement of human rights and social justice for children with disabilities exclusively, as confirmed in the following selected excerpts:

"Rooted in Eurocentricity and Afrocentricity including respect for human rights, dignity, diversity, and social justice principles, inclusion is a philosophy that is grounded in equity, equality, access, participation and achievement of children with disabilities in their neighbourhood mainstream classrooms" (IP: 13).

"Inclusion is accessible, equitable and quality education for children with developmental challenges in regular schools in their rural, farm, resettlement, township, town or urban areas. It speaks to African and European social, cultural and religious life including Christianity, African Traditional Religion and policy framework decreeing respect of human rights, tolerance of individuality, interdependence, survival and support of those with developmental delays in their birth homes, families, villages, communities and countries" (FGP: 1).

"Inclusion is human rights and social justice model of education delivery. It is education of children with developmental delays in mainstream classrooms within their localities in keeping with both the Western and African values and practices. Inclusion is about celebration and accommodation of individual differences, individual support, communalism and interdependence. International and national policies and legislations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and our [Zimbabwean] constitution as revised in 2006 informs inclusion. It is learner-responsive pedagogy to children with developmental delays in regular schools within their close proximity" (IP: 1).

Perception about inclusion

Most participants (17) held strong and positive perceptions and commitment to inclusion, based on the Eurocentric and Afrocentric moral and legal premise of the

philosophy and its criticality to humanity. For instance, IP: 17 expressed inclusion as a conduit for ensuring the right of all people to accessible, equitable and quality education in their neighbourhood educational institutions:

> "… inclusion enables both children and adults with and without developmental challenges to live and learn in their homes, communities and countries of citizenship thereby facilitating social cohesion and their social, political and economic contribution in these settings."

FGP: 6 elaborated:

> "Child-centred pedagogy in inclusion facilitates the realisation of the individual gifts and talents of both learners with and without developmental delays resulting in their contribution to the social, religious, political and economic lives of their families, villages, communities, societies, countries and the world. Equity, access, participation and achievement of all in education facilitates equal and competent serving by both individuals with and without developmental delays as breadwinners in their families and in different capacities including politicians, economists, lawyers, doctors and educationists in their villages, communities, countries and internationally."

Most participants (17) felt that inclusion benefited children with disabilities socially, academically and in their careers. For example, IP: 9 argued:

> "Inclusion "catches" [children with disabilities] young since they are acculturated to live and function in mainstream societies early their lives, afforded educational support by their typically developing peers and adults in mainstream settings and exposed to careers and professions in their mainstream localities."

IP: 19 further added:

> "Inclusion mandates the global world, countries and all other stakeholders to source resources and materials for children with disabilities for inclusion in their neighbourhood regular schools. Our government, teacher training colleges and universities, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, the Department of Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education and the Curriculum Development Unit works in partnership with local and international agencies and other countries to support inclusion in compliance with policies and legislations."

From a different perspective, FGP: 4 argued that:

> "the treatment and education of children with disabilities has passed through several eras. The current era of inclusion is ground breaking nationally and internationally as it sanctions the right of children with disabilities to pedagogy in mainstream society and denounces societal malpractices including labelling and stigmatisation of these children."

All participants (28) felt that inclusion was beneficial to both children and adults without disabilities. For instance, IP: 15 expressed that inclusion socialises both children and adults without disabilities to tolerate human diversity as they live with

those with disabilities on a daily basis in their families, schools and communities. IP: 10 explained:

> "Learning and staying with educands with developmental challenges in neighbourhood schools, families and communities condition typically developing educands to accommodate individuality. As teachers and other typically developing adults serve and are served by educands with disabilities daily, they are accustomed to accept and stay with them as full-time and equally valued members of their schools, families, homes, communities and the country."

FGP: 2 further added:

> "As a result of inclusion, children and adults without disabilities engage in social, academic and physical activities with those with developmental delays which develop in them positive attitudes towards disability."

In the same vein, FGP: 1 reiterated that "in the African Traditional Religion and culture, personhood is being in community of others and being afforded equal treatment and recognition which are advanced in inclusion" while IP: 8 argued:

> "From both Christian and African Traditional perspectives, we are all of equal worth before the Creator. Therefore, everyone deserves respect, equity and equality in all spheres of life. Hence, inclusion is an extension of our religion and culture."

Teacher competence in inclusion

All participants (28) felt ill-prepared for inclusion despite their initial and in-service training on it, as highlighted in the following selected excerpts:

> "While our compulsory 'Theory of early childhood education' initial teacher training course component inculcated in us basic theory of inclusion including characteristics of various disabilities and their identification, in-service special needs education training fostered in us comprehensive theory of inclusion including disability and special needs education and stakeholders of special needs education. However, we lack practical grounding in inclusion" (IP: 18).

> "Pre-service training in 'Theory of Early Childhood Education' exposed me to fundamentals of theory of inclusion including classroom management and adapted assessment and evaluation. I also only learnt the theory of inclusion including its psychological and sociological foundations and rehabilitation and transition of children and youth with disabilities in my in-service training. I cannot practice inclusion" (IP: 6).

> "In my initial teacher education, I was placed in a mainstream classroom for my teaching practice. I had practicum in an inclusive classroom during my training in special needs education. However, my practicum was so short for me to master Braille. My peers who were at the schools for the deaf could also not master Sign Language due to the short-lived practicum" (FGP: 5).

All participants (28) were selective regarding children with disabilities they were most and least predisposed to teach, as highlighted in the following selected statements:

> "Throughout pre-service and in-service training, I had no teaching practice in educational settings with children with 'challenging to manage disabilities' including autism, intellectual disabilities and behavioural disorders. I have theoretical grounding including use of tokens in management of these children but I lack the practice. However, with the theory I have, I can handle children with other 'easy to manage disabilities' like learning and physical disabilities" (IP: 7).

> "I have the theory on characteristics of children with 'complicated disabilities' including behavioural and emotional behaviours and their management. However, I cannot serve them for I lack practice" (FGP: 12).

> "I cannot teach children with hearing and visual impairment. I did not train in Sign Language and Braille" (IP: 11).

Concerns about teacher education for inclusion

All participants (28) revealed several barriers to teacher competence in inclusion, as confirmed in the following selected excerpts:

> "We lacked teaching practice in inclusive classrooms in our diploma and degree training to be effectively prepared for inclusion. Most of us only taught in inclusive classrooms after qualification as our colleges and universities deployed us for teaching practice in their nearest mainstream schools to cut supervision costs" (FGP: 2).

> "The lack of adequate resources including assistive technology such as computers, curriculum resources and materials, finance and inclusive academics in teacher education institutions due to national economic downturn interferes with teacher preparation for inclusion. Due to brain drain, none of our lecturers was competent in Sign Language and Braille" (FGP: 1).

> "Zimbabwe lacks specific policy framework on teacher education for inclusion. Consequently, the government, universities, teachers' colleges and other stakeholders lack legal accountability as regards the pooling of resources and institutionalisation of services and programmes for teacher preparation" (IP: 14).

Strategies to enhance teacher education for inclusion

All participants (28) cited several strategies to enhance teacher education for inclusion, as highlighted in the following selected excerpts:

> "Teachers' colleges need to design and implement programmes that teach inclusion to pre-service teachers across ECE teacher education curriculum subjects including numeracy, literacy and physical education rather than offering it as a component of the core course, 'Theory of Early Childhood Education', as well as place them in inclusive settings for micro and macro teaching practice" (1P: 16).

"Universities can ensure that the duration that pre-service and in-service teachers spend in learning the theory of inclusion is the same as that of the teaching practice in inclusive classrooms to churn out graduates with balanced theoretical and practical professional know-with and know-how of the philosophy" (FGP: 3).

"Partnership and consultation of teachers' colleges and universities with the government, parents, organisations of and for people with disabilities, communities, districts and provinces, can assist in amassing resources including professionals, assistive technology and curriculum materials for teacher preparation for inclusion. Universities and teachers' colleges can establish inter-institutional partnerships with other teacher education institutions nationally and internationally and as well seek assistance and support from international and local donors, business people, parents, churches, political parties and national and transnational companies in pooling resources for teacher education for inclusion" (IP: 9).

"Teacher educators in universities and colleges need continuous in-service training to be equipped with the current theory and practice of teacher preparation for inclusion. Provision of state-of-the-art laboratories for practicums, information rich libraries, assistive technology and teacher educators' collaboration with parents and other professional staff including audiologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, lawyers, Braille and Sign Language specialists and medical doctors can facilitate sufficient teacher preparation for inclusion" (FG: 6).

Discussion

Using individual interviews and a focus group, the current study examined Zimbabwean special needs education teachers' preparation for inclusion in ECE. Overall, participants' conceptualisation of inclusion was embedded in education for all children, including those with disabilities, through institutionalisation of child-responsive pedagogy. This finding resonates with previous research which reveals that inclusion entails the optimisation of learning outcomes of all children through transformation of educational institutions into communities which respect and celebrate differences and whose curriculum is transformed to meet learner diversity (Donnelly and Watkins 2011; EADSNE 2011; Florian 2009; Florian and Linklater 2010; Hattie 2009; Idol 2006). In the same vein, previous research reveals that inclusion constitutes policies and practices developed to be inclusive of all families and teacher preparation designed for systematic addressing of the full diverse range of needs of children (Batu 2010; Deppler 2006; Friend and Bursuck 2012;). In the same vein, previous studies reveal that inclusion embodies access, acceptance, participation, achievement, belonging, nurturing and education of all children in mainstream school classrooms regardless of their gender, culture, language, class, ability and ethnicity differences (Ainscow 2005; Allan 2006; Berry 2010; Bessette 2008; Dyson and Gallannaugh 2007; Friend and Bursuck 2012; Hornby 2010; Majoko, 2005; Voss and Bufkin 2011).

Consistent with previous research which reveals that teachers need to recognise structural and cultural contexts that might enhance or hamper inclusive practices (Biesta and Tedder 2007; Florian and Spratt 2013; Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011; Majoko 2017; Pantic 2015; Rouse 2008), participants' conceptualisation of inclusion

was ensconced in Afrocentric and Eurocentric legal, social, cultural and religious framework. Similarly, previous research reveals that effective teacher preparation for inclusion includes knowledge and information on social, cultural, policy and legislative issues that inform its theory and practice (Allan, 2006; Chhabra et al. 2010; Edwards 2010; Slee 2010). Similarly, embedded in both Afrocentric and Eurocentric knowledge bases, including legal, social, cultural, religious and moral facets, participants exhibited conceptualisation, positive dispositions, commitment and support for the inclusion of all children including those disabilities. This finding is consistent with previous studies which reveal a positive correlation between teachers' conceptualisation of inclusion and their positive attitudes and commitment to it (Agbenyega 2007; Allday et al. 2012; Arbetter and Hartley 2002; Berry 2010; Hornby 2010).

In alignment with previous studies that reveal that inclusion responds to individual differences, benefits all learners, changes attitudes towards diversity, is foundational to a just, non-discriminatory society and is cost-effective as all children are served in one pedagogical setting (Ballard 2012; Deppeler 2006; Biesta and Tedder 2007; Flecha and Soler 2013; Florian 2012), participants held strong and positive commitment and support for inclusion based on its perceived indispensability to both people with and without disabilities. This included facilitation of equitable and quality education for all, social cohesion and social, political and economic productivity. Participants also held strong and positive views towards inclusion premised on its perceived benefits to children with disabilities including facilitation of their social acceptance, early acculturation to live and function in mainstream societies and exposition to mainstream careers and professions. They also supported inclusion on the premise that it necessitated stakeholders' pooling of resources and materials and the establishment of collaborative structures and cultures such as inter-institutional partnerships in compliance with policy. This finding is consistent with previous research which reports that inclusion is a conduit for the provision of responsive pedagogy, social skills, well-being, cognitive and language abilities skills, support programmes and services and teaching and learning for children with disabilities (Black-Hawkins and Florian 2012; Deluca et al., 2013; Dyson and Gallannaugh 2007; Flecha and Soler 2013; Hornby 2010). Similarly, previous research reveals that inclusion optimises access, acceptance, participation and achievement of all children including those with disabilities and vulnerable to underachievement, marginalisation and exclusion (Berry 2010; Hornby 2010; Idol 2006).

Consistent with previous studies which reveal several benefits of inclusion to children without disabilities including development of empathy, compassion, tolerance and realisation of their own capabilities (Chireshe 2013; Idol 2006; Kisanji and Saanane 2009; Majoko 2017; Rafferty and Griffin 2005), participants further held strong and positive commitment towards inclusion based on its perceived benefits to both children and adults without disabilities, including fostering in them positive attitudes towards disability and children with disabilities, as they socialise with them in mainstream settings. The same commitment applied to inclusion premised on its perceived entrenchment in religious and cultural frameworks of Christianity and African Traditional Religion including respect, equity and equality for humanity in all facets of life. This finding resonates with previous studies which reveal that inclusion advances social justice (Ainscow 2005; Florian 2009; Odom et al. 2011; Pantic and Florian 2015; Slee 2010).

Although participants had pre-service and in-service training on inclusion and exhibited conceptualisation, positive perception and commitment to the philosophy, they felt ill-prepared to practice it citing limited exposition to its theory and a lack of teaching practice in inclusive settings. This finding resonates with previous research which reveals that, although teachers display understanding, commitment and positive attitudes towards inclusion, they repeatedly report that they are ill-prepared for its practice (Crane-Mitchell and Hedge 2007; Forlin 2010; Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011). Inconsistent with previous studies which reveal that teachers need to believe that they are qualified and capable of teaching all children (Black-Hawkins and Florian 2012; Edwards 2010; Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011; Florian and Linklater 2010; Florian and Spratt, 2013; Pantic 2015), participants were selective regarding service to children with disabilities as they felt ill-prepared to teach children with behavioural and emotional disorders, autism, intellectual disabilities and visual and hearing impairments while they were prepared to teach children with learning and physical disabilities. Similarly, previous studies found that, overall, teachers hold positive attitudes and commitment to inclusion although they feel that they are ill-prepared to include certain children on account of the nature and severity of their disabilities (Arndt and Liles 2010; Chireshe 2011; Jennings 2007; Majoko 2016a).

Participants were ill-prepared to practice inclusion as a result of their lack of teaching practice in inclusive settings during their training. This finding contradicts with previous studies which found that teacher education for inclusion constitutes opportunities for teacher candidates to work in real classrooms to learn and apply critical competencies in inclusion (Friend and Bursuck 2012; Rafferty and Griffin. 2005; Jung 2007; Winn and Blanton 2005). Similarly, previous studies found that teacher candidates need adequate opportunities to see, experience and to be involved and participate in guided practice with feedback on model instructional strategies in inclusive pedagogical settings (Friend and Bursuck 2006; Jung 2007; Majoko, 2016b; Oliver and Reschly 2010; Rouse 2008).

Participants felt that inadequate resources, including assistive technology such as computers, curriculum resources and materials, finance and inclusive academics in teacher education institutions, due to the national and economic meltdown and brain drain, hampered effective teacher preparation for inclusion. Similarly, previous research established that, in most countries, the lack of individual and institutional capacity in teacher education institutions interferes with teacher preparation for inclusion (Musengi and Chireshe 2012; Slee 2010; Voss and Bufkin 2011). Consistent with previous research which found that the absence of an enabling legal framework globally impedes successful and effective inclusion (Alborz et al. 2013; Arbetter and Hartley 2002; Winn and Blanton 2005), participants revealed that the lack of supportive legal infrastructure impeded teacher preparation for inclusion as stakeholders, including the government, teachers' colleges and universities, were not legally bound to pool resources and institutionalise services and programmes.

In alignment with previous studies which found that analysis, revision and infusion of inclusion content across teacher education courses is integral in teacher preparation and development for inclusion (Donnelly and Watkins 2011; EADSNE 2011; Florian 2012), participants felt that exposure of pre-service teachers to inclusion across ECE teacher education curriculum subjects, including numeracy, literacy and physical education, rather than as component of a core course, could enhance their preparation

for it. Similarly, previous studies found that careful planning and monitoring of training on inclusion in general education subjects facilitates teacher preparation for it (Chireshe 2013; Majoko 2016c). Previous research also established that the provision of inclusion as a "core" subject instead of an "additional" subject in teacher education programmes is foundational in effective teacher preparation for the philosophy (Education for All 2015; Majoko, 2016b). Participants perceived that teaching pre-service and in-service teachers the theory of inclusion for a study duration, which is comparable to their teaching practice in inclusive settings, could equip them with both the theory and practice of inclusion for its successful and effective practice. Similarly, previous studies reveal that teacher education institutions need a balance between theory and practice and presentation of teaching as a problem-solving or research-in-action process entrenched in learning of all children including those with disabilities in order to close the theory-practice gap (Florian and Rouse 2009; Forlin 2010; Hornby 2010).

Participants perceived that the deployment of pre-service and in-service teachers in inclusive classrooms for teaching practice could enhance their preparation for inclusion. This finding resonates with previous research which reveals that a pre-practicum prior to initial teacher education programme, a practicum as a component of the teacher education programme, supervised school teaching experience, a monitored probationary period and induction with mentoring arrangements are integral in teacher preparation for inclusion (Donnelly and Watkins 2011; Majoko, 2013). Similarly, previous research established that teacher educators need to ensure that teaching practice is designed and well-focused to meet professional competences and standards (Allday et al. 2012) as it is foundational in moulding future teaching behaviour and provides an opportunity to resolve the research-to-practice gap (Chireshe 2011; Mandina 2012). Previous studies also reveal that teacher candidates need practicum experiences with opportunities to examine and foster their beliefs and learn about addressing child diversity in inclusive classrooms (Oliver and Reschly 2010; Rouse 2008).

Participants felt that consultation and partnership of teacher education colleges and universities with other stakeholder individuals, organisations and institutions, including parents, schools, the government, organisations of and for people with disabilities, districts and provinces, could help in pooling resources for teacher preparation and development such as professionals, assistive technology and curriculum materials and resources. This finding is in alignment with previous studies which found that teacher education institutions need links to other partners (EADSNE 2011) and that

> the enterprise of teacher education needs to venture out further and further from the university and engage even more closely with schools in a mutual agenda of transformation with all the struggle and messiness that that implies (Darling-Hammond, 2006:300).

Similarly, previous research reveals that teacher education for inclusion needs meaningful relationships between schools, universities and teacher candidates (Florian 2009; Friend and Bursuck 2012; Jung 2007). Consistent with previous studies which found that collaboration of stakeholders is integral in pooling expertise and other resources for effective service delivery in inclusion (Black-Hawkins and Florian 2012; Florian and Rouse 2009), participants perceived that teachers' colleges and

universities' establishment of collaborative structures could assist in the requisition of resources for teacher education for inclusion. This includes national and international inter-institutional partnerships with teacher education institutions and seeking assistance from individuals, organisations and institutions including parents, churches, political parties and national and transnational companies.

In alignment with previous research, which reveals that individual capacity building, including recruitment, induction and on-going professional development of teacher educators, can enhance service delivery in teacher preparation for inclusion, participants perceived that continuous in-service training could foster in teacher educators the theory and practice of teacher preparation for inclusion (Ainscow 2005; Allday et al. 2012; Bessette, 2008; Forbes 2007). Similarly, previous studies reveal that teacher educators need to be equipped with positive attitudes, knowledge, understandings, competencies and skills to prepare and develop teachers to confront the challenges of significantly increasing social, linguistic and cultural diversity in pedagogical settings for the development of equitable education systems and progression towards provision of equal opportunities for all learners including those with disabilities (Forlin 2010; Jennings 2007; Malak 2013).

Participants felt that institutional capacity, including the establishment of state of the art laboratories for practicums, information rich libraries and requisition of assistive technology, could enhance teacher preparation for inclusion. This finding is consistent with previous studies which reveal that responsiveness to a changing educational landscape demands that the professional development needs of teacher educators be addressed as a component of teacher education for inclusion as they share the same lack of preparation for inclusion as do teachers (Florian 2012). Similarly, previous studies show that teacher education institutions need to engage in capacity building of teacher educators which is embedded in embracing the complex nature of teaching and learning (Alborz et al. 2013; Edwards 2007; Oswald and Swart 2011). In addition, previous research indicated that effective teacher education for inclusion depends on the availability of human, material, financial and technological resources (Ainscow 2005; Batu 2010; Florian and Spratt 2013).

Participants felt that collaboration of teacher educators with parents and other professionals including therapists, audiologists, lawyers, medical doctors, Braille and Sign Language specialists could facilitate adequate teacher preparation for inclusion. Previous studies reveal that teacher education institutions need to establish and reinforce links with non-professionals, para-professionals and professionals in order to prepare and develop teachers to manage child diversity, disability and other differences (Ballard 2012; Biesta and Tedder 2007; Edwards 2010). Previous studies also show that teacher education institutions need to work with and through others, including liaison with professionals from other disciplines, for effective teacher education for inclusion (Pantic and Florian 2015; Forlin 2010; Hundert 2007).

Implications

Although participants held strong and positive perceptions and commitment to inclusion premised on both an Afrocentric and a Eurocentric knowledge base, they were selective as regards children with disabilities they felt prepared to serve citing their lack of teaching practice in inclusive classrooms during their training. The failure of teachers' colleges and universities to institutionalise needs responsive interventions to address feelings of ill-preparation of teachers to serve all children,

regardless of their disabilities, may negatively affect these teachers' commitment to inclusion. Teacher education institutions can, on the other hand, capitalise on teachers' strong and positive perceptions and commitment to inclusion to solicit their professional needs as a springboard for institutionalisation of responsive preparation and development which can culminate in improved service delivery.

Premised on the benefits of inclusion for children and adults with and without disabilities, and those vulnerable to underachievement, marginalisation and exclusion, it is incumbent on communities, societies, countries and the global world, stakeholder individuals, organisations and institutions including parents, teachers, schools, teacher education institutions, governments, academics and the donor community to work in collaboration in order to optimise teacher preparation for inclusion for optimum service delivery for the advancement of humankind. Based on inadequate exposure of participants to teaching practice in inclusive settings, teacher education institutions need to deploy pre-service and in-service teachers to inclusive school classrooms during their professional preparation and development to enhance their successful and effective practice of inclusion. Consistent with the participants' lobbying for exposure to "balanced" theory and practice of inclusion, teacher education institutions need to fuse theory and practice of inclusion in teacher preparation and development.

Based on the revealed centrality of Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity in inclusion, consideration of the African and Western philosophies and concerns of teachers and other stakeholders in designing, implementation, management and evaluation of teacher education programmes can optimise teacher preparation for inclusion. Likewise, the infusion of African and European philosophical values, norms, beliefs, practices and principles with regards to disabilities and inclusion in ECE curricula can develop in both children with and without developmental challenges, accommodation and celebration of human diversity thereby optimising inclusion in ECE.

Considering the lack of adequate resources in teacher education institutions, a multi-sectorial approach including consultation and partnership of these institutions with other stakeholders, including local and international communities, donors, other institutions and governments, can assist in pooling resources such as finance, technology and materials. In view of the inadequate professional preparation of teacher educators, including the lack of proficiency in Sign Language and Braille, institutionalisation of needs assessment based individual capacity building initiatives including provincial and national conferences, seminars and conferences can foster in teacher educators competencies and skills in effective teacher preparation for inclusion. Also, embodying in pre-service and in-service teacher education content on support infrastructure in inclusion including the legal framework, technological, material, human and financial resources, can optimise teacher preparation for inclusion.

The current study is a baseline for future studies on ECE special needs education teacher preparation for inclusion that could investigate and ascertain effective models for enhanced teacher capacity building. Research on models of ECE special needs education teacher preparation for inclusion needs to be undertaken to equip teachers with appropriate competencies and skills for successful and effective inclusion of all children regardless of their individuality. Needs assessments can be executed in future studies in order to identify and respond to the support needs of ECE special needs education teachers in initial and in-service preparation and development for inclusion.

While the current study used individual interviews and a focus group to collect data, future studies could use a combination of different instruments including self-administered questionnaires, participant observation, non-participant observation and document analysis.

Research limitations and future research

Since participants for the current study were drawn from one educational province whereas inclusion is practised nationally, the transferability of its findings to other provinces in Zimbabwe is unknown. It is, therefore, imperative to investigate the preparation of ECE special needs education teachers for inclusion across provinces in the country for a national representative sample for the transferability of findings. The perspectives, practices and experiences of other stakeholder individuals, organisations and institutions, including parents, children with and without disabilities, mainstream teachers, the donor community, school administrators, policy makers, educational psychologists and therapists were excluded from the present as it only involved ECE special needs education teachers as participants. It is, consequently, unknown whether the perspectives, experiences and practices of the aforementioned stakeholders who did not participate in the present study resonate with those of ECE special needs education teachers who participated in the study. Future studies could investigate these stakeholders to solicit their perspectives, experiences and practices for an in-depth understanding of ECE special needs education teacher preparation for inclusion. As participants were concerned about their lack of preparation for inclusion, future studies could examine successful and effective models of ECE special needs education teacher preparation for inclusion.

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